CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by Mount Royal University Institutional Repository (MRUIR)

They've Found It. Can They Read It? Adding Academic Reading Strategies to Your IL Toolkit

Margy MacMillan and Stephanie Rosenblatt

What good is teaching students how to find scholarly resources if they can't read them? Undergraduate students are often ill prepared for the deep reading critical to student success and required for research assignments. Librarians are uniquely placed to help novice students navigate discipline-expert discourses. The presenters will make the case for integrating reading instruction, particularly those skills needed to decipher scholarly articles, into information literacy sessions, and provide practical strategies for teaching this critical skillset.

Traditional information literacy (IL) instruction focuses on finding, evaluating, and citing materials but seldom addresses how students will actually use the resources they find. Fewer of our incoming students are prepared for the deep, sustained reading faculty expect, while more faculty are requiring even lower-division students to incorporate scholarly and peer-reviewed research into their papers, often without any formal support for interpreting these materials. This mismatch frustrates students who cannot read the resources they are required to use, and faculty who see students struggling to integrate information effectively into assignments. Students are stymied by the jargon, structure and purpose of scholarly articles and manage this problem by reading only as far as the first "good" quotation, cherry-picking numbers and other details at random and otherwise misusing the information—meeting the letter, if not the spirit, of the professor's research requirements. The papers students produce may look scholarly, but don't always manifest the depth of understanding and integration of knowledge envisaged by instructors.

From our work with students, we know they have difficulties reading academic text, but why should librarians get involved? At a very basic level, helping students read these resources is key to establishing their use as part of scholarly work. We spend thousands of dollars on journals and the literature is full of librarians complaining that students still prefer webpages and Wikipedia. The simple fact is students are more comfortable with these online resources because they can read them. As professionals who often navigate the space between novice and expert in the disciplines, librarians are uniquely placed to understand both where the students are and where they need to go in order to participate in discipline conversations. Helping students interpret scholarly sources is a natural extension of our work as librarians. It should be incorporated into our understanding of information literacy.

Margy MacMillan is Instruction Librarian, Communications Librarian, Mount Royal University, e-mail: mmacmillan@mtroyal.ca; Stephanie Rosenblatt is Instruction Librarian, Electronic Resources/Serials Coordinator, Cerritos College, e-mail: srosenblatt@cerritos.edu

The Problem with Reading

The typical American or Canadian college student is ill prepared for college-level reading. According to a 2006 American College Testing (ACT) report, *Reading Between the Lines*, only 51% of students who took the ACT test, a college entrance exam, were reading at the college level.[1] This is similar to results reported in the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that found that only 38% of American high school seniors read at or above the proficient level.[2] A similar trend appears in Canada, which doesn't assess reading nationally. Almost 60% of students entering a large Ontario college tested below the college reading/writing level in 2013.[3]

One of the problems seems to be that students aren't doing enough of their assigned reading.[4] Several authors use National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to support their view that students are not spending enough time reading and preparing for their classes.[5] It's commonly stated that the students should spend two to three hours preparing for each hour of class, meaning the average undergraduate should spend 24 hours a week studying. In the 2009 NSSE only 27% of college seniors and 24% of college freshmen surveyed reported spending more than 21 hours a week preparing for their classes which included "studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities."[6]

Why don't students read? Students describe their reading assignments as boring, don't understand the importance of the assigned reading, find the texts difficult, lack confidence in their reading abilities, or lack reading comprehension skills.[7] A small study conducted by Jolliffe and Harl examined the reading practices of 21 college freshmen who kept detailed reading logs for two weeks.[8] When describing the difference between the reading in high school and college, one student reported, "… what is different is not the amount of reading, but the level and wording of the text. The college text jumps to a level of reading exponentially higher than high school texts, and this is what causes the struggles for students."[9]

More importantly, students seem unable to make connections between the texts they read. Jolliffe and Harl prompted students to make three types of connections with the texts they read: text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text. While the students were able to make all three with prompting, they weren't evenly distributed in the journal entries. Students were more likely to make text-to-self or text-to-world connections than to make connections between the texts they were reading. The authors of this paper have also found this to be the case.[10] However, these text-to-text connections are the crux of the deep reading expected by faculty in college-level classes: "[Deep reading] examines the text itself closely, draws upon the reader's experience with and knowledge of other texts, and engages both the reader's own perspective and historical and cultural resources to uncover complex meanings."[11]

Many studies have drawn connections between deep reading and improved learning. Marton's early work on reading was an attempt to understand why certain students were more successful.[12] "Students who had adopted a deep approach in general understood the text in a qualitatively better way—in greater detail and in a more integrated and coherent form—and retained it longer."[13] Reading in a deeper, more connected way also relates to wider aspects of learning and success.[14] Several studies demonstrated that students who made better connections understood that text better and tended to have higher GPAs.[15]

College-level reading is difficult and complex and in order to succeed, the typical first-year undergraduate needs to synthesize a huge amount of new material quickly. At the beginning of the 21st century the primary means of communication in higher education remains the written word: Students need to read and make connections between texts in order to learn. This process only becomes more difficult when lower-division students are asked to add scholarly journal articles to the mix.

According to the 2014 NSSE, 81% of the first-year students surveyed were already being asked to use peer-reviewed sources in their introductory cours-

es. These types of articles have become increasingly specialized and complex. A 2002 paper comparing scholarly articles published in the 1970s with those in the late 1990s found articles in most fields to be longer and to contain more references.[16] There has also been rapid growth in the number of publications. A 2003 paper cites the number of active, scholarly/peer-reviewed journals listed in *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory* for Summer 2001 as 14,694.[17] A recent search of *Ullrich's Web* lists 197,960 active publications with over 73,000 scholarly titles. As four California university professors state, "We view this glut of unutilized and even inconsequential literature as mostly a function of reward systems in universities, research institutes, and funding agencies. Indeed, scholarly publishing may be more about promoting scholars than promoting scholarship."[18]

These materials are problematic for lower-division undergraduate students. As French describes, most assignments at this level "…are necessarily broad, as many classes are broad in scope and are survey courses, rather than focused studies of particular issues … Asking a student to write a five page paper on capital punishment is to turn that student loose into a thicket of information resources in which hundreds of thousands of pages have been written on the minute aspects within the broader context of capital punishment."[19] A student at this level wants an overview of her topic, but most scholarly articles won't provide one. Those that do will be hidden within the glut of publications. The student really needs an encyclopedia article or a book on the topic, but the student doesn't know this and the professor doesn't require these types of sources.

If students are having difficulty understanding and connecting to texts assigned in their classes—reading that is somewhat mediated and supported by their instructors—how are they dealing with the complex reading that they often need to complete on their own?

Why Librarians Should Care

Librarians could simply throw up their hands like many other faculty and continue to complain about how students don't appreciate/use/cite the wealth of resources we lay before them in IL sessions. Or we can do something about it. As Rosenblatt notes, *"Shouldn't we, as instructional librarians, be concerned about students' abilities to use the information they have discovered?"*[20] Through our interactions with students we may be better placed than many to observe the challenges students face integrating scholarly materials into their academic work. One of the authors was alerted to the 'reading problem' by requests for assistance with secondary source citation. Students were frequently citing from literature reviews rather than the discussion or conclusion sections, a behavior also noted by Emmons et al (2002). The other found in her research that students were using articles as separate entities and not synthesizing information across articles. Both of us and likely many readers have had reference interactions like this:

Student: I need some references for my paper.
Librarian: Ok, what are you writing about?
Student: Oh, I've already written the paper. I just need to find six articles for the bibliography.

Sound familiar? Both authors have done research on how students use information, and arrived independently at the conclusion that at least part of the problem was reading.

Reading is a fundamental but often overlooked aspect of IL. Neither the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* of 2000, nor the latest version of the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* attribute much importance to this activity which must occur well in advance of evaluating "information and its sources critically" (Standard 3)[21] or understanding that "Scholarship Is a Conversation."[22] The first outcome for Standard 3 in the old ACRL *Standards* does mention reading, but it has been our observation and that of others that many students skip this step and proceed to identifying verbatim material for quotations.

The new threshold concepts-based *Framework* similarly assumes reading under a number of the knowledge practices outlined in two of the frames, "Research as Inquiry" and "Scholarship Is a Conversation."

While reading is not generally explicitly defined as part of IL, and therefore as part of the librarian's responsibility, it is nevertheless assumed within many of the attributes and practices we aspire to foster in students. In order to accomplish higher IL goals, we need to pay attention to the fundamental challenges students face in reading academic materials. So, on a purely pragmatic level, yes, teaching reading is our responsibility.

What Librarians Can Do

Not only is incorporating instruction on reading scholarly material our responsibility, but librarians, in many ways, are the people best equipped to do this. More than most faculty, our work requires us to read materials in other disciplines, whether it is to understand a new liaison area, develop a class, or assess materials for a collection. We are practiced in reading in fields that are new to us and likely more comfortable and accepting of it than others.[23] This experience has given us strategies that we can pass on to students—novices in their own disciplines—to help them understand new jargon and unfamiliar information structures. We may also feel freer to criticise discourse in a discipline and to advocate for students against the incomprehensibility of densely-written articles. As Simmons states, we are "in a unique position that allows mediation between the non-academic discourse of entering undergraduates and the specialized discourse of disciplinary faculty."[24]

Another aspect that librarians bring to reading is a deep understanding of the scholarly communication environment. We understand that academic articles are not written with first-year students in mind. As librarians, we are also aware of intermediary resources that can serve as introductions to those scholarly conversations, resources like subject encyclopedias. A survey of faculty at Mount Royal University showed they rated subject encyclopedias of very low importance across all four years of programs in all disciplines. That same survey demonstrated the high value faculty place on scholarly articles as resources, even in first year, and their disappointment with students' abilities in this regard. Interestingly, almost a third of faculty expected first year students to learn this critical skill on their own.[25]

There are two ways librarians can work on the "reading problem": explicitly in our IL classes and as advocates on campus, raising awareness about the issues and pushing the dialogue beyond the "lazy students" trope. We have a role in ensuring that our collections are used effectively, and in exposing the fact that students face challenges in using them. Of course the most effective way to advocate for more explicit, effective instruction in academic reading is to lead by example. We have posted more detailed strategies for overcoming the challenges students face on a blog where you will also find links to research and useful resources (https://readingstratsacrl2015.wordpress.com/). The challenges students face fall into three categories: the purpose and value of scholarly articles, the affective dimension of reading difficult texts, and technical aspects of article structure, language and data presentation.

Some of the most important work librarians can do is to serve as advocates for students by raising awareness about reading at their institutions. When we focus on issues related to reading during our instruction sessions we aren't just starting a dialogue with students, we're also engaging the discipline faculty members who bring their students to our sessions. Our unique position as "expert novices" provides us with the experience, vocabulary, and gravitas needed to speak to both audiences. Just as we've seen that faculty members' bibliographic requirements play a greater role than library instruction in determining the types of sources students use in their research papers,[26] the only way to make a real impact on academic aliteracy is to begin an open conversation about this problem on our campuses, while exposing other faculty members to strategies they can incorporate into their own classes.

We need to continue asking if faculty are satisfied with how students are incorporating academic resources in their work, and offer reasons why students may not be meeting expectations. In demonstrating our value to our institutions we have to show that our concern for information literacy does not stop when the student finds the 10 articles mandated by the instructor, but continues to the point where the student has used those resources effectively, a task that cannot be accomplished without reading. We also need to start using authentic assessments that actually measure the complex processes that make up information literacy. Correctly-formatted citations don't provide an accurate measure of the acquisition of information literacy skills. We can advocate for assessment that demands students read and use materials well, but this will only be ethical if there will be support for students to gain these skills. At the very least we can raise awareness about the difficulties students face.

Notes

1. American College Testing, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*. (Iowa City, Iowa: ACT Inc., 2006), 1.
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), NCES Reading Stats*. 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013 Reading Assessments, retrieved November 13, 2013, from the Main NAEP Data Explorer (http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/). (This table was prepared November 2013.)
3. Nicholas Dion and Vicky Maldonado, *Making the Grade? Troubling Trends in Postsecondary Student Literacy* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013), 18. http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/HEQCO%20Literacy%20ENG.pdf
4. Colin M. Burchfield and John Sappington, "Compliance with Required Reading Assignments," *Teaching of Psychology* 27 no. 1(2000): 58-60; Michael A. Clump, Heather Bauer, and Catherine Bradley. "The Extent to which Psychology Students Read Textbooks: A Multiple Class Analysis of Reading Across the Psychology Curriculum." *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 31 no. 3 (2004): 227-232; David A. Joliffe and Allison Harl, "Studying the 'Reading Transition' from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?" *College English* 70 no. 6 (2008):599-617; Simon A. Lei, Kerry A. Bartlett, Suzanne E. Gorney, and Tamra R. Herschbach, "Resistence to Reading Compliance Among College Students: Instructors' Perspectives," *College Student Journal* 44 no. 2 (2010): 219-229.
5. Amit Sharma, Bert Van Hoof, and Barton Pursei, "An Assessment of Reading Compliance Decisions Among Undergraduate Students," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 13 no. 4 (2013): 103-123; Joliffe and Harl "Studying the 'Reading Transition' "; Alice Horning, "Reading, Writing, and Digitizing: A Meta-Analysis of Reading Research," *Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal* 10 no.2 (2010):243-270.
6. *NSSE Report Builder—Public Version (2009-2010)*, accessed November 30, 2014, http://bl-educ-cprtest.ads.iu.edu/SAS/rb_nsse.html.
7. Lei, et al., "Resistance to Reading Compliance,"; Sharma, Van Hoof, and Pursei, "An Assessment of Reading Compliance."
8. Joliffe and Harl, "Studying the 'Reading Transition.' "
9. Joliffe and Harl, "Studying the 'Reading Transition,' " 609.
10. Margy MacMillan, "Student Connections with Academic Texts: A Phenomenographic Study of Reading," *Teaching in Higher Education* 19 no.8 (2014):943-954. doi:10.1080/13562517.2014.934345; Stephanie Rosenblatt, "They Can Find It, But They Don't Know What to Do with It: Describing the Use of Scholarly Literature by Undergraduate Students," *Journal of Information Literacy*, 4(2), (2010):50–61. https://spongebob.lboro.ac.uk/ojs/index.php/JIL/article/viewFile/LLC-V4-I2-2010-1/1506
11. Sherry Linkon, "The Reader's Apprentice: Making Critical Cultural Reading Visible," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 5 No. 2 (2005): 247-273, p. 250.
12. Ference Marton,"Some Effects of Content-neutral Instructions on Non-verbatim Learning in a Neutral Setting." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 18 (1): 199–208. doi:10.1080/0031383740180112
13. Ibid., 143.
14. Gregory Schraw and Roger Bruning, "Readers' Implicit Models of Reading." *Reading Research Quarterly* 31 no. (1996): 290–305. doi:10.1598/RRQ.31.3.4.; Michele Dornisch, Rayne A. Sperling, and Jill A. Zeruth. "The Effects of Levels of Elaboration on Learners' Strategic Processing of Text." *Instructional Science* 39 no.1 (2009): 1–26. doi:10.1007/s11251-009-9111-z.
15. Svjetlana Kolić-Vehovec, Igor Bajšanski, and Barbara Rončević Zubković. "The Role of Reading Strategies in Scientific Text Comprehension and Academic Achievement of University Students." *Review of Psychology* 18 no.2 (2011): 81–90. http://hrcak.srce.hr/81461.
16. Glenn Ellison,"Evolving Standards for Academic Publishing : A Q-R Theory." *Journal of Political Economy* 110 no. 5 (2002): 994–1034. http://sitesfinal.uclouvain.be/econ/DW/DOCTORALWS2004/bruno/writing in economics/jpe.pdf.
17. Michael Mabe, "The Growth and Number of Journals," *Serials* 16 no.2 (2003): 191-197.
18. Stanley W. Trimble, Wayne W. Grody, Bill McKelvey, and Mohamed Gad-el-Hak, "The Glut of Academic Publishing: The Call for a New Culture," Academic Questions 23(2010):276-286, doi:10.1007/s12129-010-9179-6, p. 278.
19. Tiana French, "Scholarly Articles and Community and Junior College Students: An Uneven Match?" Community and Junior College Libraries 13 no.1 (2005):13–23. doi:10.1300/J107v13n01, p. 18

20. Rosenblatt, "They Can Find It," 60.
21. Association of College & Research Libraries, Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000), 11.
22. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, accessed January 2, 2015, http://acrl.ala.org/ilstandards/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Framework-for-IL-for-HE-draft-3.pdf, p.11.
23. Saranne Weller, "New Lecturers' Accounts of Reading Higher Education Research," *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33 no.1 (2011):93–106. doi:10.1080/01580377X.2010.516744; Saranne Weller, "Comparing Lecturer and Student Accounts of Reading in the Humanities," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 9 no.1(2010):87-106; David A. Green, "Words Fail Us: How Academics View Language and Ideas in Higher Education Research." *International Journal for Academic Development* 15, no. 1 (2010): 47–59. doi:10.1080/13601440903529901.
24. Michelle Holschuh Simmons, "Librarians as Disciplinary Discourse Mediators: Using Genre Theory to Move Toward Critical Information Literacy," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, no. 3 (2005): 297-311, p.298.
25. Brian Jackson, Margy MacMillan, and Michelle Sinotte. "Great Expectations: Results from a Faculty Survey of Students' Information Literacy Proficiency," Paper presented at IATUL Conference Helsinki, Finland. 2-5 June, 2014 Available at http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2036&context=iatul
26. Andrew M. Robinson and Karen Schlegel. "Student Bibliographies Improve When Professors Provide Enforceable Guidelines for Citations." *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no.2 (2004): 275-290.